

“What Kind of Church Do We Want to Be?”
John 8:2-11; Psalm 51:1-14

I think she was pretty good looking — in a sleazy sort of way. Like those women you see at the gym wearing those real tight and skimpy outfits. You know you shouldn't watch, but you just can't quite help yourself. I think that's how she looked, worthy of a discreet double take.

Of course, on this day, some of that was hidden because of the circumstances. The story gives the impression that this was occurring in real time. So, when she was jerked up from her compromising situation, a loose dress, or blanket or robe would have quickly been thrown over her. Which meant her ill fitting garment enabled one to see snippets of the body underneath. You can visualize all the men in the crowd desperately trying to act disinterested while at the same time discreetly shifting in their position to get a glimpse of what heretofore had only been imagined.

But not only the men are enthralled. The women are simultaneously curious, angry, and relieved. You see, I don't think this was the woman's first time. I believe this is only the first time she got caught. I think rumors about this woman had been floating around for years. Her hair always seemed to flow a little more fully and provocatively. Her dresses always showed just a bit more ankle. At weddings, she always claimed the wine had made her a little flirty toward someone else's husband. The undercurrent of gossip about who she was and how she acted found confirmation at the moment, and all the women of her neighborhood were secretly glad to have this threat removed from their community.

Her accusers thrust her right in front of the crowd the young, revolutionary rabbi had gathered at the Temple. Likely in the Portico of the Gentiles, the men and women sat as he taught. The scripture records that the scribes and Pharisees brought her before the group and made her stand before all of them. Some translations say she stood in the middle of them, surrounded by those undoubtedly eager to bring her to justice.

“Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery.”

Now, the scribes and Pharisees mention this detail because they wanted the crowd's imagination to kick into overdrive. And the author of the story notes it because he wants your imagination to do exactly the same. The very act. There they are. Naked. In the very act. Yanking her from that compromising moment they have brought her here.

“Now in the law,” they continue, “Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” Through the centuries there has been much speculation as to why the male sinner is not also here. The Old Testament says the man and woman both are to be stoned. The most common explanation has focused on the patriarchal nature of first century culture. Blame the woman, let the man go.

Maybe. But I choose to give a different tint to it. I don't think this was her first time. I believe this is the first time she got caught. But through the years there had been other husbands. There had been rumors. She had permanently fostered that "come hither" look. People were certain, had whispered, she had been with this man or that husband. But no one could prove it — until now. The man got off because they all knew she was the aggressor.

So, here stands this sexual, provocative, husband stealer, and right there in front of his followers, the scribes and Pharisees want to know what Jesus thinks they should do with her. Verse six tells us they were asking this question because they wanted to bring a charge against Jesus. The way they had planned this was to give Jesus only two choices, and whichever one he selected would create an indictment of him. If he said stone her, as the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy demanded, then he violated the Roman law which had taken the power of the death penalty away from the Jews. On the other hand, if he said not to stone her, he spoke against God's law, God's revealed words in the scriptures.

So, what does Jesus do? He bends down and begins to write on the ground with his finger. Why? No one knows. This is the only time in the Bible when Jesus writes. Some scholars think he did so to manage his anger. A couple of biblical manuscripts say he wrote down the sins of the woman's accusers. Others note that a Roman judge would write down his verdict before reading it. A newer interpretation, and one I think has merit, explains that in first century Palestine writing on the ground was an act of refusal and disengagement. Essentially, Jesus says, I'm not going to answer that.

But they keep pestering him, demanding a response. How can he not stick up for God's law, God's word, these wives who have been wronged?

So, finally, Jesus straightens up and says, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

Can you feel the shock that ripples through the crowd? His words are not just directed at the scribes and Pharisees, but all those who have come to hear him.

As he bends down once more to write on the ground, there is a rustling, a shifting as people struggle to reconcile both their anger and their guilt.

Then slowly they begin to steal away, barely looking at one another. The eldest first. And then all the rest, reluctantly and then more quickly, until just Jesus and the condemned woman remain.

"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir,"

"Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

A Sunday School teacher was telling the youngsters about Daniel and the Lions Den. She had a picture of Daniel standing, brave and confident, with a group of lions around him. One little girl started to cry. The teacher said, "Don't cry. The lions are not going to eat Daniel." The girl said, "That's not what I'm crying about. That little lion, over in the corner, isn't going to get any food."

That day at the Temple, most of the crowd must have thought that Jesus was worried about the wrong person.

The woman caught in the act of adultery is one of the best known and most often quoted stories in the Bible. Most people can recite the popular expression: “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.” It is our first and last defense against self-righteous hypocrites. But the teaching of the story casts its net of truth far wider, ensnaring each and every one of us.

Which is why it bounced around the New Testament. There is fairly universal, scholarly agreement that the passage does not belong here in John’s gospel. None of our most ancient biblical manuscripts place it here. Some texts put it after Luke 21:38. Its style does carry Lukan characteristics. But likely this story floated independently for some time. Most scholars agree it is a true story about Jesus. But it struggled to find a home likely because Christians struggled to know what to do with it. Because if one pushes aside the one theme caricature about self-righteous hypocrites, the story points a condemning finger at each one of us.

To truly understand it, we must absorb its distasteful parts. And the first thing to note is that Jesus’ critics are absolutely correct. God’s Law, God’s Word, the Old Testament explicitly said an adulteress was to be stoned to death. There was no doubt, no argument about what the Bible said. There was also no doubt about the disgusting nature of the woman.

The writer wants us to feel her sin. Caught in the very act of committing adultery. That’s right. Get the picture in your mind. A husband stealer. A home wrecker. A temptress. A person who should not, cannot, receive sympathy. They have come to condemn this woman who is obviously guilty and deserving of severe punishment.

So, what does Jesus do? “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

They wanted to charge the woman. Jesus charges all of them.

“Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Who has the authority to condemn? None of them. None of us. The only person who had a right to condemn her, did not.

Otherwise, every one of us is the woman caught in adultery. Our sin may be cruelty, meanness, stinginess, self-righteousness, egocentricism, or a myriad of other faults, sins, and indiscretions. Most of us carry more than one. And Jesus says to you and me, “There’s the rock. If you are sin free, then please, throw the first stone.”

A little boy had been pawing over the stock of greeting cards at a stationery store. After a few minutes the clerk became curious and asked, “Just what is it you’re looking for, sonny? Birthday greeting? Message to a sick friend? Anniversary congratulations to your mom and dad?”

The boy shook his head, “No.”

“Then what kind of card is it that you want?” asked the clerk.

The boy answered wistfully, “Got anything in the line of blank report cards?”

Each of us knows our spiritual report cards are not blank.

“Neither do I condemn you. Go you way, and from now on do not sin again.”

The Early Church struggled with this story because it seemed the woman got off too lightly. Shouldn't she at least have a couple of stones thrown at her? The Church, Christians, the world, have always struggled with the free, unmerited, radical love and forgiveness offered by Jesus Christ. We want to condemn, punish, make people pay for their sin. Jesus wanted to set them on a new path, change their lives.

The Christian gospel is, and will always be, inadequate and contradictory for those demanding recompense, fairness, getting what we deserve. Jesus' point is that by that logic and reality, everyone of us would have to be stoned. God's love and forgiveness reach beyond what we deserve to what we can be.

It is important to note that we are never told what happened with the woman. Did she change, turn 180 degrees, and begin to live a life of faith and purity? Or did she return to her old ways?

We don't know. There are never any guarantees. But the complete, revolutionary love and forgiveness of Jesus give every person, including you and me, an opportunity to start fresh and new.

In October 2006, instead of seeking revenge, dozens of Amish neighbors mourned the death of the milkman who killed five of their young girls. About half of the seventy-five mourners at the burial of gunman Charles Carl Roberts IV were Amish. “It's the love, the forgiveness, the heartfelt forgiveness they have toward the family,” said Bruce Porter, a fire department chaplain. “I broke down and cried seeing it displayed.” He said the killer's widow, Marie Roberts, was also touched by the compassion of the Amish mourners. “She was absolutely deeply moved, by just the love shown.”

Radical, transformative forgiveness that changes both those who receive the forgiveness, and those who give it.

“What kind of Church do we want to be?”

As we begin a new year, this is the question the story asks each one of us. Do we want to be an inclusive church, one that says regardless of your sin you are welcome here?

Do we want to be a forgiving church? Do we recognize that not a single one of us here has a right to cast the first stone?

And, do we want to be a second chance church? One where men and woman can find a place to heal, be forgiven, and begin again. Do we want people

to hear a gospel that gives them the opportunity to break free from their old life, to start fresh and clean? Do we want the words they hear to be: “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more”?

If this is what we want, it will only occur if you and I decide that we will think, act, love, and forgive like Jesus.

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